

**Witness and Infinite Responsibility:
The Martyr's Desire in Emmanuel Levinas**

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Thesis and Scope

For the majority of the common era, the term “martyr” has been semantically determined by varying Christian theological interpretations, notwithstanding the extension of this term to other religious traditions. Consequently, the themes of sacrifice and belief have assumed a dominant hermeneutical position. Several studies have ventured broad explanations predicated on sociological, archaeological, or linguistic data, while others have attempted a psychological interpretation of martyrdom—all of which have created various categories for further analysis.¹ What unites these myriad accounts is a focus on the deaths of the martyrs. In fact, Candida Moss writes that the most interesting question concerning martyrs is, “What distinguishes martyrdom from suicide?”² Because of the elaborate descriptions of the deaths in the martyr-texts along with precise analogues between martyr deaths and those of celebrated heroes, I do recognize the validity of this reasoning. Furthermore, accounts of martyr deaths shed light on the cultural constructions of the ancient world, which contrast sharply with our own and thus, illuminate an otherwise shadowy past.³ Nevertheless, I refuse Moss’s conclusion that death constitutes the most interesting pathway into martyr research, and will seek to provide an alternative to this prevailing trend.

¹ See Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 1995); Jan Wilhelm van Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees*. Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997); Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Robin Darling Young, *In Procession before the World: Martyrdom as Public Liturgy in Early Christianity* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2001); Nicole Kelley, “Philosophy as Training for Death: Reading the Ancient Christian Martyr Acts as Spiritual Exercises,” *Church History* 75, no.4 (December 2006): 723-747 (accessed April 17, 2014); Paul Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity* (London: T & T Clark, 2006); Elizabeth Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Candida Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, Traditions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

² *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 1-2.

³ See *The Suffering Self*.

If martyr deaths announce a spectacular point of contact with the ancient world, then the daily praxis of witnessing could also provide a window, but not only into the ancient world. I want to suggest that the value of witness bears tremendously on our contemporary situation. While much has been written of the sacrifice of martyrs, thereby imbuing these lives with Christian theological interpretations, I contend that a martyr—as one who bears witness—is actually an anti-sacrificial figure. This does not imply that sacrifice is an unwarranted term when describing witnesses. In the work of Emmanuel Levinas, “sacrifice” is the name given to the pre-reflective encounter with alterity. This “sacrifice” is the condition for the assumption of responsibility in daily life, and thus constitutive of responsible subjectivity. Thus, I argue that an ethics of sacrifice—the place of the immemorial—displaces a socio-politics and theology of sacrifice. I understand the politics of sacrifice to be an evasion of responsibility, the imposition of blame onto a figure who in no way can be solely responsible for the crises faced by a given community.⁴ In contrast, I argue that a martyr assumes more responsibility than she could ever hope to bear, and thus, constantly opposes the sacrificial system in which she lives. The sacrifice that does occur is a sacrifice of the primacy of the nominative. Witnesses—as accused ones, or called ones—are stripped of sovereign subjectivity and instead, birthed through responsibility for another. A political sacrifice of oneself would amount to an abandonment of the responsibility borne by the witness. I anticipate a significant counter to my proposal, especially through use of martyr texts that cite the great enthusiasm of the one about to die. In these instances, it would seem that sacrifice is precisely what the person wants to offer. However, my interest is not the “conscious” intention of the martyr but rather the “preconscious” approach of alterity that is the

⁴ See Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992); Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Bloomsbury Revelations, trans. Patrick Gregory (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

condition for responsibility. Consequently, I am interested in wresting the term away from the dominant Christian views, in large part because I find it significant for understanding socio-political trends of the 20th and 21st centuries. In this way, I hope to retrieve the term from the sectarian “scrap-heap” and open it to broader political application.

In the work of Emmanuel Levinas, the issues of witness and responsibility form the crux of his phenomenological investigations, especially as it concerns a subjectivity irreducible to substance (matter) or essence (spirit). In sharp contrast to modern Western philosophy, Levinas does not begin with a perceptive subject that voluntarily engages the world. Instead, he reduces the ontological subject to an affective subjectivity; a restless, divided hostage compelled to respond by another that can never be located and thus, categorized. This “hostage” is not a self, since this would imply a substantive consciousness that exercises complete agency over her actions. Such a voluntary subjectivity is the impression of a trace left by the Other (God/person), and is, thus, always already indebted to the One that commands.

The exteriority of the Infinite becomes somehow an inwardness in the sincerity of a witness borne... The command is stated by the mouth of him it commands. The infinitely exterior becomes an “inward” voice, but a voice bearing witness to the fission of the inward secrecy that makes signs to another.⁵

What appears as a conscious decision is actually a coerced response. At the very least, the decision is secondary to an irrecuperable event that commands one’s steps.

Here Levinas is building on the phenomenological tradition and practice linked foremost to Edmund Husserl. For Husserl, the stability of a subject originates in the precise correlation of intention and intuition, which corresponds to the intimate relationship between act and object. Immanuel Kant had already stumbled on this insight in the First Critique; “Thoughts without

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998): 147.

content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.”⁶ But, it was Husserl’s task to examine the manner in which subjectivity was achieved through this relationship, and in his earlier writings, Husserl is decidedly against the metaphysical speculation indebted to Kant’s ontological divisions. Derived in part from his teacher, Franz Brentano, Husserl’s theory of intentionality is existence-independent; the intentional object is transcendent not because of its verifiable occupation of time-space or demonstrable intra-mentality, but rather due to the nature of consciousness itself, which is object-directed. Intentionality is the reaching out of consciousness toward an object (mental or extra-mental) which, regardless of existence, is always transcendent. Consequently, as intentional beings, humans are constituting the meaningful world they inhabit. They are world-creators themselves, or in Kant’s language, “sovereign legislators.” It is here that Levinas begins to break with “idolatry” in both Husserl and Heidegger. Having witnessed the horrors of world-creating sovereignty, Levinas queries whether a multiplicity of such “allergic egoisms” can ever be in relation and if the subject “arrive[s] at the human condition prior to assuming responsibility for the other [person] in the act of election that raises him up to this height.”⁷

In place of a self-responsible (Husserl) or heroic (Heidegger) subject, Levinas offers the witness. Here it is important to emphasize that Levinas’s witness is not simply a third-party account of observed phenomena. For example, while it would seem that one can know “everything” happening in the world without joining the world, closer examination suggests that refusing the call of the Other does not alleviate the weight of responsibility. Consequently, witnessing carries a burden, as seen in juridical settings, where one, if subpoenaed, is “obliged”

⁶ *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965): 93.

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” trans. Sean Hand, *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Autumn 1990).

to give an honest account in court. Obligation precedes the account offered and compels the witness to share. It would seem, therefore, that witnessing is never simply witnessing, but also the responsibility of “bearing witness.” Herein lies the relationship between witness and responsibility for Levinas. Taken with my claim that the martyr is an anti-sacrificial figure, the witness occurs “in” and “as” the ethical encounter. The accused one, the “me,” approaches the Other in desire—not erotic desire, which suggests a need that will be filled by the Other, but rather as an overflowing site, the infinite in the finite. The assumption of infinite responsibility is both impossible and necessary. As an endless reconfiguration, bearing witness reshapes the subjectivity of the subject into one uniquely able to respond. This becoming is the emergence of the political, which can never be severed from the ethical, since the obligation of responsibility requires its “being borne.” In this sense, truth is not a datum to be revealed in witness, but is rather the infinitely responsible act of witnessing itself.⁸ The recurrence of call, what Simon Critchley insightfully describes as the “original traumatism,” is the journey of being-for-the-other that Levinas will consistently claim is the anarchic identity of the subject.⁹ And in support of my argument, this journey is the path of the martyr, understood as one who endlessly bears witness in the journey of infinite responsibility i.e. the inviolable covenant between the ethical and the political.

Methodology

In contrast with philosophies of presence that privilege an illuminated object of inquiry, Levinas is concerned with that which lives outside of phenomenal horizons. But phenomenology

⁸ Hanoach Ben-Pazi, “Ethical Dwelling and the Glory of Bearing Witness,” *Levinas Studies* 10 (2015): 221-248.

⁹ *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas, and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 2009): 183-195.

traditionally prioritizes the en-lightened space of intention, through which objects appear in consciousness. Consequently, if Levinas is doing phenomenology, it is a transformed phenomenology.¹⁰

To explain the divergence that Levinas facilitates and which is crucial to my reconception of the martyr, I will critically examine Edmund Husserl's work, as well as that of his student, Martin Heidegger. In particular, Husserl's construction of transcendental subjectivity is crucial to Levinas's own departure from the constitutive subject. Phenomenology, as Husserl conceived it, is guided by a world-constituting subject. The objectivity of science and every other discipline derives from this intentional subject. Levinas agrees that objectivity is derived from subjectivity, but he works against the sovereign subject of Western philosophy, instead positing a hither side to subjectivity from which his discussions of alterity arise. Levinas admits that Heidegger helped phenomenology to foreground the subject's place in the world, a task necessary for his own philosophy of affect. However, whereas for Heidegger the subject remains primary, in Levinas's thought the subject is always the consequence of a primary subjugation, namely the binding of infinite responsibility. It is only in response to the demand placed on me by the Other that I become uniquely subjectivated.

While it is necessary to establish Levinas's departure from Husserl and Heidegger, it is equally important to proceed—albeit cautiously—towards a methodology that might be loosely ascribed to Levinas. How does he arrive at his conclusion regarding the primary significance of the Other in relation to subjectivity? And in light of this encounter, how might we work towards a different style of philosophizing, one that is perhaps much more than a style but certainly less than a school.

¹⁰ See Adriaan Peperzak, "Levinas' Method," *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998).

To begin, Levinas is clearly indebted to the textual interplay practiced in philosophical Judaism. By acknowledging this, we steer clear of the pretense that naively argues for a presuppositionless philosophy. Levinas has presuppositions, and for me to appropriate his theoretical insights is to understand the threads of his philosophy and my own. Interrogation of one's closest intellectual tradition is an essential part of the work.¹¹ For sure, my interest in the concept of martyr derives from my own intellectual and religious tradition, Christianity. I have already discussed in detail Levinas's debt to Husserlian and Heideggerean phenomenology. In a transformed phenomenology, the subject does not originate through intention but response.

As I explore the practices of bearing witness, I want to conceive of the martyr figure in this way. Thus, my work can be understood as one that prioritizes conceptual analysis above textual criticism, although I hope to employ the research of this scholarship in my introduction. To be clear, my data gathering resembles that of other constructive philosophical projects, whose aim is to re-vision the delimited space of a concept or practice. By blending historical and philological research with the "unexplored horizons" of phenomenology to which Levinas frequently alludes, I hope to provide an opening for the creative juxtaposition of contemporary and ancient witness. I want my work to be a refusal of the understanding of the martyr that privileges literal sacrifice of body. In short, I aim to offer an interdisciplinary argument for retrieval and commendation concerning the constitutive function of testimony in shaping subjectivity.

Importance of Research

The issue of subjectivity is far too controversial and the literature far too vast for me to venture a comprehensive claim here. However, in light of postmodern concerns with the "ticklish

¹¹ Ibid.

subject,” I am suggesting that the work of Levinas makes an important contribution to the fields of religion, philosophy, and international studies—though this list is far from exhaustive.¹² I further contend that the sovereign subject of modern thought has been thoroughly critiqued, without the offer of an ethically satisfying alternative. Levinas brings needed weight to these conversations, while remaining faithful to the voices from the hither side of modernity. Just as important, he enables us to more effectively interrogate our condition.

Coinciding with the destabilization of identity and general incredulity toward metanarratives, how might we speak of witness? If we are unable to trust the mental configuration of data from our senses, then the judicial, political, and religious spheres that are predicated on the primacy of rational capacity are at an impasse. Does testimony have a place in our world? And if so, how might we re-conceive it and account for its importance to the just formation of community.

I will argue that testimony must be disentangled from rational observation in order to function effectively as the engine of community. This amplifies the question of justice, and therefore, grants an urgency to my research as it concerns the “unseen” of society. Since discourse affects our vision—the use of concepts to illuminate the world—the stated, or “said,” must be returned to saying, the approach of those un-illuminated by observation.

¹² Slavoj Žižek has explored this topic in his work, *The Ticklish Subject* (London: Verso, 2008). His claim amounts to a double-down of the Lacanian hypothesis that the subject is constituted in the therapeutic relationship. Conjoined with his idiosyncratic blend of political provocation, Žižek concludes that the subject is forged in a particular kind of revolutionary struggle. However, like so many other thinkers that have ventured into this field, the subject begins to appear as either a heroic—masculinized—saboteur or an absurdist necessity. Levinas, by contrast, proposes that subjectivity is not of our choosing and is certainly not about whimsical revolutionary fantasy. Instead, the subject is literally subjected prior to any freedom or self-consciousness by the demand of the Other, through whom the Infinite speaks.

Chapters

Chapter 1: Seeds Sown in Blood: Theologies of Martyrdom

In this chapter, I will explore previous investigations of martyrdom, attempting to highlight major trends in Judeo-Christian history and distinguish these classifications from other uses of the term, “martyr.” Though my project is constructive in nature, it is necessary to demonstrate the breadth of scholarship as well as the current positions on what constitutes a “martyr,” in order to distinguish my own usage of the term. However, it is also necessary that I distinguish my own positions from those adopted by previous studies as well as the *au courant* celebrations of militancy by authors such as Slavoj Zizek and Alain Badiou.

Chapter 2: Precursors: Witness in the History of Phenomenology

To provide context for Levinas’s own “transformed phenomenology,” I will briefly introduce the work of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, as it concerns the ideas of witness or vision. In Levinas’s break from both, at issue is the kind of subject that emerges in phenomenology. Is the “I” merely self-responsible, heroic, or some combination of the two? Neither is sufficient for Levinas, though both are essential to my juxtaposition of his thought and the practice of the martyr.

Chapter 3: Otherwise Exposed: Bearing Witness as Becoming a Subject

This chapter deals with Levinas’s treatment of exposure, which he sometimes describes as “passivity” before being passive, at other times as denuding. Unlike the activity of the subject stressed by Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas’s constitution goes the other direction. The Other person commands the “me,” (an accused one), and in my respond to the command, the accused becomes an “I.” To put this linguistically, the accusative always follows the nominative. Thus, the subject can be characterized as fundamental vulnerability.

Chapter 4: Substitutional Subjectivity: Sacrifice and the Other

Here I finally put the earlier discussions of martyrdom together with Levinas's own concept of witness to introduce a different conception. I anticipate this being the longest chapter, since it will entail inclusion of the work of Rene Girard, George Bataille, and Moshe Halbertal for an in-depth discussion of sacrifice. Once I have presented these candidates for a theory of sacrifice, I will highlight how the martyr, for Levinas, avoids the evasion of responsibility characteristic of sacrifice, while nevertheless sacrificing in a register "otherwise than being."

Chapter 5: Given Over to the Impossible: The Martyr as Infinitely Responsible

In a section that has Girard and Levinas in agreement—albeit from different positions—I will put forward the plight and constitution of the subject as one given to infinite responsibility. Only in assuming the impossible task does one live into the requirements of subjectivity established by Levinas, and per my argument, lived out by a martyr.

Chapter 6: The Politics of *L'Avenir*: Martyrdom and Desire in the Postcolony

In my final section, I hope to apply my position on the martyr to the geopolitics of race by way of the work of Achille Mbembe.¹³ In facilitating a conversation between Levinas and Mbembe, I hope to demonstrate both the ongoing relevance of Levinas's thought as well as the need to build on his insights in the construction of cosmopolitical futures.

Bibliographic Method

Thus far, I have searched several resources at the University of Denver, including Academic Search Complete, Philosopher's Index, and Humanities & Social Sciences Index Retrospective: 1907-1984, as well as library catalogs at DU and Iliff School of Theology. The search terms I have used thus far include: responsibility AND Levinas; responsibility AND martyrdom;

¹³ See *On the Postcolony*, trans. A.M. Berrett, Janet Roitman, and Murray Last (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001) and *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

responsibility AND witness; witness AND Levinas; responsibility* AND Levinas AND witness*; infinity* AND Levinas; respons* AND witness*; Levinas AND politic*; Weil AND Levinas; Weil AND responsibility*; Weil AND respons*; Mbembe AND Levinas; Weil AND Mbembe; Levinas AND martyr*; Weil AND martyr*; phenomenology AND martyr*; Weil AND phenomenology; and Levinas AND Weil AND responsibility. My ongoing research plan consists of following the chapter trajectory, researching the necessary scholarship to expand my understanding of the relevant concepts. This would entail more in-depth reading of martyr scholarship in addition to the work of Achille Mbembe and other postcolonial scholars. Since I am using the work of Emmanuel Levinas as primary engine for my interpretation of witness and responsibility, I will certainly spend the most time in his actual texts, along with the relevant secondary literature. Some additional resources that I anticipate using are WorldCat; ATLA Religion Database; and Cambridge Collections Online.

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